

Research Paper

Role of Empathy in Moral Judgement Among Adults: A Predictive Study

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ABSTRACT

Empathy plays a fundamental role in understanding the emotions, perspectives, and experiences of others and is considered an essential component of moral functioning. Individuals with higher levels of empathy are more likely to recognize the emotional consequences of their actions, thereby promoting ethical decision-making and socially responsible behaviour. The present study aimed to examine the relationship between empathy and moral judgement among adults and to determine whether empathy significantly predicts moral judgement. A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed with a sample of 100 adults. Data were collected using standardized measures of empathy and moral judgement and analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's product-moment correlation, and simple linear regression. The findings revealed a statistically significant moderate positive correlation between empathy and moral judgement ($r = .534, p < .001$). Regression analysis further indicated that empathy significantly predicted moral judgement, accounting for 28.5% of the variance in moral judgement scores ($R^2 = .285, F(1,98) = 39.142, p < .001$). The results suggest that empathy is an important psychological factor influencing moral judgement among adults. These findings contribute to the growing body of literature highlighting empathy as a significant predictor of ethical reasoning and may have implications for educational, counselling, and organizational settings where moral decision-making is essential.

Keywords: *Empathy, Moral Judgement, Adults, Prediction, Correlation, Ethical Decision-Making*

Meaning and Nature of empathy: Empathy is a multidimensional psychological construct that enables individuals to understand, share, and respond to the emotions and experiences of others. It involves recognizing another person's emotional state, adopting their perspective, and responding with appropriate concern and compassion. Empathy encompasses a wide range of processes, including emotional resonance, cognitive perspective-taking, and the motivation to help others. It also allows individuals to appreciate that people's decisions and behaviours are influenced by their past experiences, emotional states, and environmental circumstances. Consequently, empathy promotes tolerance, understanding, and socially responsible behaviour.

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Moral judgement refers to the process through which individuals evaluate actions, intentions, motives, or situations as morally right or wrong according to ethical principles and social standards. It develops progressively through cognitive growth and social experiences. Kohlberg's theory of moral development explains that moral reasoning advances through pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional levels, reflecting increasing sophistication in ethical thinking. Similarly, Rest's Four-Component Model emphasizes moral sensitivity, moral judgement, moral motivation, and moral character as essential elements of moral functioning. Together, these theories suggest that effective moral judgement depends not only on reasoning ability but also on emotional understanding and concern for others.

Studies have shown that individuals with greater empathic abilities tend to exhibit stronger moral reasoning, greater concern for fairness, and more ethical decision-making. Empathy has also been associated with improved moral sensitivity, moral leadership, prosocial behaviour, and social responsibility across diverse populations, including adolescents, counsellors, engineering students, and preschool children. Although some studies suggest that empathy alone may not always determine ethical behaviour, the majority of evidence supports its significant contribution to moral judgement and moral development.

Despite increasing interest in empathy and moral judgement, relatively few studies have examined whether empathy directly predicts moral judgement among adults. Most previous research has focused on adolescents, children, educational settings, or specific professional groups. Therefore, the present study seeks to examine the relationship between empathy and moral judgement among adults and determine whether empathy serves as a significant predictor of moral judgement.

Having empathy can include having the understanding that there are many factors that go into decision making and cognitive thought processes. Past experiences have an influence on the decision making of today (Baird, JD, Nadel, L., 2010). Understanding this allows a person to have empathy for individuals who sometimes make illogical decisions to a problem that most individuals would respond with an obvious response (Dietrich, C., 2017). Broken homes, childhood trauma, lack of parenting and many other factors can influence the connections in the brain which a person uses to make decisions in the future. According to Martin Hoffman everyone is born with the capability of feeling empathy (Davidov, M., 2011).

Since empathy involves understanding the emotional states of other people, the way it is characterized is derived from the way emotions themselves are characterized. If, for example, emotions are taken to be centrally characterized by bodily feelings, then grasping the bodily feelings of another will be central to empathy (O'Malley, W.J., 1999).

On the other hand, if emotions are more centrally characterized by a combination of beliefs and desires, then grasping these beliefs and desires will be more essential to empathy. The ability to imagine oneself as another person is a sophisticated imaginative process. However, the basic capacity to recognize emotions is probably innate and may be achieved unconsciously. Yet it can be trained and achieved with various degrees of intensity or accuracy (Baird, J.D., Nadel, L., 2010).

Freud: states empathy as the origin of comic pleasure and also as central to the process of psychoanalysis.

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Fleiss: described empathy as putting oneself into another's place, or to "step into his [another's] shoes".

Winnicott: associated empathy with the infant's early holding environment created by the mother "feeling" the infant's needs. This environment must be reliable, protect the infant from excessive annihilation fears, and involve physical holding.

Development of Empathy

Empathy develops gradually through biological and environmental influences across different life stages.

1. **Empathy in Childhood:** Children first show empathy through emotional reactions such as crying when another infant cries. During preschool years, they begin understanding that others have separate feelings. By middle childhood, perspective-taking and helping behaviours improve.
2. **Empathy in Adolescence:** During adolescence, empathy becomes more advanced due to cognitive growth and wider social experiences. Teenagers develop better understanding of different perspectives, emotions, identity, and moral reasoning.
3. **Empathy in Adulthood:** In adulthood, empathy becomes more stable and refined through life experiences. Adults' express empathy in relationships, parenting, teaching, healthcare, and caregiving. However, stress and burnout may reduce empathic responses.

Factors Influencing Empathy Development

- **Parenting Style:** Warm, supportive parenting promotes empathy, while neglectful parenting may hinder it. **Attachment:** Secure attachment with caregivers supports trust, emotional regulation, and empathy. **Social Learning:** Children learn empathetic behaviour by observing parents, teachers, peers, and role models. **Emotional Intelligence:** Understanding and managing emotions improves empathetic responses. **Culture:** Cultural values influence emotional expression, care for others, and social connectedness.
- **Biological / Neurological Basis of Empathy:** Empathy is influenced by brain regions, neural systems, genetics, and hormones that help people understand and respond to others' emotions.

Mirror Neuron System: Mirror neurons activate when a person performs an action or observes someone else doing the same action. They help in understanding others' emotions and behaviours.

Brain Regions Related to Empathy: **Prefrontal Cortex** – reasoning and perspective-taking, **Amygdala** – processes emotions like fear and distress, **Anterior Cingulate Cortex** – emotional awareness and pain perception, **Insula** – awareness of emotions and others' suffering.

- **Hormonal Influences:** **Oxytocin** ("bonding hormone") – supports trust, caregiving, bonding, and emotional understanding, **Cortisol** ("stress hormone") – high stress levels may reduce empathy and emotional availability, **Dopamine** – helping others feels rewarding and encourages prosocial behaviour, **Serotonin** – supports mood balance and calm emotional responses and **Vasopressin** – linked with attachment and social bonding.

Hormones influence empathy indirectly, depending on personality, experiences, stress, and relationships.

Models of Empathy

1. **Greenson's Model of Empathy:** Greenson stated another model of empathy which is very experiential in nature. In this the therapist observes initially “out of it” in the therapeutic situation, but slowly become the patient. Then the therapist pay attention through the “working model” of the patient by listening to what he/she is conveying through words, then modifying them into pictures and feelings from the patient’s memories. Here, the therapist applies experiences similar to the patient to make an emotional connection and experiences a feeling of “aha”. Lastly, the therapist determines how best to communicate this understanding to the patient.
2. **Multidimensional Model of Empathy:** The **Multidimensional Model of Empathy** conceptualizes empathy as a multifaceted construct comprising both emotional and cognitive components rather than a single unified process. According to this model, **affective empathy** refers to an individual's capacity to emotionally share or respond to another person's feelings, such as experiencing compassion or emotional resonance. In contrast, **cognitive empathy**, also known as perspective-taking, involves understanding another person's thoughts, intentions, and emotional states without necessarily sharing those emotions. The model also includes **empathic concern**, which reflects an individual's motivation to care for others and alleviate their distress, thereby promoting compassionate and prosocial behaviour. Another important component is **personal distress**, a self-focused emotional reaction to another person's suffering that may interfere with effective helping behaviour. Although these components are interrelated, the model emphasizes that each contributes differently to social behaviour and moral judgement. A balanced integration of cognitive and affective empathy is considered essential for fostering prosocial behaviour, ethical decision-making, and appropriate moral judgement.

Moral Judgment

Meaning of Moral Judgement: The moral judgement refers to the determination a person makes about an action (or inaction), motive, situation, or person in relation to standards of goodness or rightness (Bredemeier, B., & Shields, D., 1998).

People articulate a moral judgement, for example, when they say that an action is right or wrong, that a person is good or bad, or that a situation is just or unjust. In modern moral psychology, morality is considered to change through personal development (Ellemers, N., 2017).

Lawrence Kohlberg, Jean Piaget, and Elliot Turiel have cognitive-developmental approaches to moral development; to these theorist’s morality forms in a series of constructive stages or domains. In the Ethics of care approach established by Carol Gilligan, moral development occurs in the context of caring, mutually responsive relationships which are based on interdependence, particularly in parenting but also in social relationships generally.

Moral development is the process where child learn to develop the standards that teach him/her right and wrong within their society, based on social and cultural norms, and laws.

In other words, it is the determination a person makes about an action/inaction, motive, and articulate a moral judgement i.e., when they say this action is right or wrong or this is good or not (Boardley, I.D., 2012).

Models of Moral Judgement:

1. FOUR-COMPONENT MODEL: James Rest (student of Kohlberg) composed four-component model of moral functioning:

- Moral sensitivity: it is basically the recognition part where one recognises that ethical problem exists. This requires awareness that how our behaviour impacts others, identifying possible courses of action, and determining the consequences.
- Moral judgement: after determining the ethical problem, then choose among the courses of action identified above. They make judgements about what is right or wrong in a specific context. There are 2 components to determine whether a solution is right or not:
- Component moral development and defective reasoning. The first component comprises all the three stages of Kohlberg theory (pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional) and in the second component insecurities, greed and ego have been described.
- Moral motivation: conflicts in moral values may arise in a sector like job security, social acceptance, and wealth. Two factors “rewards and emotions” play an important role in ethical behaviour.
- Moral character: the final stage of moral action is executing the plan – requires character. It is composed of agents like cope with fatigue, resist distractions, and develop sophisticated strategies to reach goals. The individual with the strong will and confident and their abilities, are more likely to persist.

Theory of Moral Judgement by Kohlberg

Lawrence Kohlberg proposed that moral development occurs through three levels, each consisting of two stages. According to the theory, individuals progress through these stages in a fixed order, and moral reasoning develops with cognitive growth.

The first level of Kohlberg's theory is **pre-conventional morality**, which is commonly observed in children. At this stage, moral decisions are primarily based on the consequences of actions rather than on internalized moral principles. Individuals judge behaviour in terms of rewards and punishments. **Stage 1**, known as *Obedience and Punishment Orientation*, involves following rules to avoid punishment. **Stage 2**, *Individualism and Exchange*, is characterized by recognizing that different people may have different viewpoints, with decisions guided by personal interests, rewards, or reciprocal benefits.

Conventional morality: The second level is **conventional morality**, where individuals begin to internalize social norms and expectations. Moral decisions are guided by the desire to maintain positive relationships and uphold social order. In **Stage 3**, *Interpersonal Relationships*, individuals behave in ways that will be viewed as good or acceptable by others and seek approval through maintaining harmonious relationships. **Stage 4**, *Maintaining Social Order*, emphasizes respect for authority, obedience to laws, and the importance of fulfilling social duties to preserve stability and order within society.

Post-conventional Morality: The final level, **post-conventional morality**, is based on personal moral principles and universal ethical values rather than external rules or social

expectations. Individuals at this level evaluate laws and social norms critically and recognize that they should promote justice and protect fundamental human rights. **Stage 5**, *Social Contract and Individual Rights*, acknowledges that laws can be modified when they fail to serve the welfare of society. **Stage 6**, *Universal Ethical Principles*, represents the highest stage of moral reasoning, in which individuals make decisions based on self-chosen ethical principles such as justice, equality, and respect for human dignity, even when these principles conflict with existing laws. Kohlberg suggested that only a small proportion of individuals attain this highest level of moral development.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Maibom, H. (2010) conducted research which shows that emotions and empathy are important in moral judgement. Emotions help people decide what is right and wrong, but their role may be limited in some situations. Empathy also develops through healthy relationships and attachment, especially in adolescents. Teenagers with better attachment quality and stronger empathy skills often show better moral judgements.

Kotluk and Tormey (2022) examined engineering students and reported that low levels of emotional empathy did not significantly alter ethical decision-making during case-based learning. The authors concluded that although emotional engagement may enhance learning, ethical judgements are also influenced by cognitive reasoning and contextual interpretation.

Carlson et al. (2022) demonstrated that perceived motives strongly shape moral judgements. Individuals often evaluate actions based not only on outcomes but also on inferred intentions, indicating that empathy operates alongside cognitive evaluations of motives when forming moral judgements.

Research published in the *Revista Española de Pedagogía* (2023) examined whether inclusive pedagogies in higher education can improve students' moral competence through the Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion (KMDD). The findings showed that KMDD significantly improved moral competence, while empathy-based activities provided no additional benefit. The study suggested that experiential and community-based learning may better promote moral development and inclusive citizenship skills.

Kyriakou et al. (2023) found that emotional expression significantly influenced moral judgements among bilingual individuals, suggesting that emotions remain an important determinant of ethical reasoning despite contextual variations.

Du et al. (2024) found that empathy mediated the relationship between theory of mind and moral sensitivity among preschool children. Children demonstrating higher empathic abilities exhibited greater awareness of fairness, care, authority, and moral responsibility, emphasizing empathy's role in early moral development.

Ricon and Leopold Katz (2024) found that adolescents with stronger attachment quality and higher empathy demonstrated better moral judgement, suggesting that healthy interpersonal relationships contribute to moral development through enhanced empathic abilities.

Zhang et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis demonstrating that higher empathy was consistently associated with better moral judgement, particularly among adolescents. Their findings further indicated that females generally reported higher empathy

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and moral judgement than males, emphasizing the developmental significance of empathy in ethical reasoning.

Harnes (2025) suggested that historical empathy develops through understanding multiple perspectives, emotional engagement, contextual thinking, and moral judgement, highlighting empathy's importance within educational settings.

Taylor and Farnis conducted research among 70 school counsellors in northern Israel found that moral leadership was positively associated with emotional intelligence, empathy, and self-differentiation. Empathy and emotional intelligence emerged as the strongest predictors of moral leadership, explaining 73% of its variance, highlighting the importance of emotional and interpersonal competencies in promoting ethical leadership.

Objectives:

The study was conducted with the following objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between empathy and moral judgement among adults.
2. To determine whether empathy significantly predicts moral judgement.

Hypothesis

- **Research Hypothesis 1 (H₁):** Empathy will be positively associated with moral judgement among adults.
- **Research Hypothesis 2 (H₂):** Empathy will be a significant predictor of moral judgement among adults.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative correlational research design. Data were collected from 100 adults using standardized psychological measures of empathy and moral judgement. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and simple linear regression to evaluate the proposed relationship and predictive effect.

Instruments:

- **Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI):** This scale was developed by Mark H. Davis in 1980. It is 5-point likert scale. reliability of this scale is 0.70-0.80.
- **Moral Identity Scale (MIS):** This scale is developed by Karl Aquino and Americus Reed in 2002. It is 5-point likert scale. Reliability of this scale is 0.77 to 0.83.

RESULTS

Data Screening and Cleaning

Prior to statistical analysis, the dataset was screened for completeness and response consistency. A judgment-based data cleaning procedure was adopted to address ambiguous double-marked responses. Where participants selected two responses for the same item, the response that was most consistent with the participant's overall response pattern was retained. This approach ensured that the dataset remained internally consistent while minimizing unnecessary data loss. After data cleaning, responses from 100 participants were included in the final analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize participants' scores on empathy and moral judgement.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Empathy and Moral Judgement (N = 100)

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Empathy Score	100	2.814	0.495	1.786	4.143
Identity Score	100	2.921	0.646	1.600	4.600

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 indicate that participants obtained a mean empathy score of 2.814 ($SD = 0.495$) and a mean moral judgement score of 2.921 ($SD = 0.646$). The observed scores suggest moderate levels of both empathy and moral judgement among the participants.

Relationship between Empathy and Moral Judgement

Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between empathy and moral judgement.

Table 2 Pearson Correlation between Empathy and Moral Judgement

Variables	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	Interpretation
Empathy Score	1.000	—	—
Moral Judgement Score	.534**	< .001	Moderate positive correlation

The results revealed a statistically significant moderate positive correlation between empathy and moral judgement ($r = .534$, $p < .001$). This finding indicates that individuals with higher empathy scores also tended to report higher levels of moral judgement. Therefore, the research hypothesis (H1) proposing a positive relationship between empathy and moral judgement was supported.

Regression Analysis

A simple linear regression analysis was performed to determine whether empathy significantly predicts moral judgement among adults.

Table 3 Model Summary

Statistic	Value
R	0.534
R ²	0.285
Adjusted R ²	0.278
Number of Observations	100

The regression model demonstrated a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.534, indicating a moderate relationship between the observed and predicted values of moral judgement. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = .285$) showed that empathy explained 28.5% of the variance in moral judgement. The adjusted coefficient of determination (Adjusted $R^2 = .278$) indicated that the model retained substantial explanatory power after adjusting for sample size and the number of predictors.

Table 4 ANOVA for Regression Model

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Regression	11.795	1	11.795	39.142	< .001
Residual	29.531	98	0.301		
Total	41.326	99			

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The ANOVA results indicated that the regression model was statistically significant, $F(1,98) = 39.142$, $p < .001$. This finding demonstrates that empathy significantly predicts moral judgement. Thus, supporting the hypothesis (H2).

Table 5 Regression Coefficients

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% Confidence Interval
Constant	0.959	0.318	3.010	0.003	[0.327, 1.591]
Empathy	0.697	0.111	6.256	< .001	[0.476, 0.918]

Regression coefficient analysis showed that empathy was a statistically significant positive predictor of moral judgement ($B = 0.697$, $SE = 0.111$, $t = 6.256$, $p < .001$). Specifically, for every one-unit increase in empathy, moral judgement increased by approximately 0.697 units. The 95% confidence interval did not include zero, further supporting the statistical significance of the predictor.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the relationship between empathy and moral judgement among adults and examined whether empathy significantly predicts moral judgement. The findings revealed a statistically significant moderate positive relationship between empathy and moral judgement, indicating that individuals with higher empathy tend to demonstrate stronger moral judgement. Furthermore, regression analysis showed that empathy significantly predicted moral judgement, explaining 28.5% of the variance in moral judgement scores.

These findings are consistent with the literature reviewed in the present study. Previous research has emphasized that empathy facilitates understanding of others' emotions, intentions, and perspectives, thereby strengthening moral reasoning and ethical decision-making. Studies included in the literature review have reported positive associations between empathy and moral judgement across different populations, including adolescents, school counsellors, and educational settings. Research has also highlighted that empathy enhances sensitivity to harm, promotes concern for others, and contributes to socially responsible behaviour.

The findings may be explained by the multidimensional nature of empathy. Individuals with higher cognitive empathy are better able to understand the perspectives and intentions of others, whereas affective empathy enables them to emotionally respond to another person's experiences. Together, these processes facilitate thoughtful moral evaluation and ethical decision-making. Similarly, Rest's Four-Component Model suggests that empathy contributes to moral sensitivity, enabling individuals to recognize ethical issues before making moral judgements. Kohlberg's theory further supports the view that advanced cognitive development and perspective-taking strengthen moral reasoning.

Although empathy accounted for a meaningful proportion of variance in moral judgement, a substantial percentage remained unexplained, suggesting that additional psychological, social, cultural, and personality factors may also influence moral judgement. Future research should therefore examine multiple predictors to develop a more comprehensive understanding of moral decision-making among adults.

Overall, the present findings support the growing evidence that empathy is an important psychological resource for promoting ethical reasoning, moral responsibility, and socially appropriate behaviour.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the role of empathy in predicting moral judgement among adults. The findings demonstrated a significant positive relationship between empathy and moral judgement and established empathy as a significant predictor of moral judgement. Adults with higher empathy scores were more likely to exhibit stronger moral judgement, indicating that understanding and responding to the emotions and perspectives of others contributes to ethical reasoning and responsible decision-making. These findings support existing theoretical perspectives on empathy and moral development and highlight the importance of fostering empathy in educational, professional, and community settings. Enhancing empathic abilities may contribute to improved interpersonal relationships, responsible citizenship, and ethical behaviour across diverse social contexts.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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